

“Shams-i Tabrizi and the Audacity of Bayazid Bistami”

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One of the most memorable encounters in the history of Sufism is surely the first meeting of Shams-i Tabrizi and Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi. Although there are numerous versions of the story of this encounter, probably the most important account is the one that Shams himself recorded in his discourses (*Maqalat*), where he says that he spoke as follows to Rumi:

The first thing I spoke about with him was this: “How is it that Bayazid did not need to follow [the example of the Prophet], and did not say “Glory be to Thee” or “We worship Thee?”

And Rumi completely understood the full implications of the problem and where it came from and where it was leading to. It made him inebriated on account of his purity of spirit, for his spirit was pure and cleansed and it shone within him. I realized the sweetness of this question from his inebriation, though I had been previously unaware of its sweetness.¹

Franklin Lewis, who has analyzed this message at length, has provided a persuasive interpretation of the way that “both Shams and Rumi followed the Prophet, unlike Bayazid Bistami ... Shams returns again and again to this question of following the Prophet, and the case of Bayazid apparently provided the touchstone by which Shams could gauge the inner orientation of others and test whether a fancy for mystical speculation or indulgence in antinomian behavior outweighed a person’s love and respect for the spiritual attainment of the Prophet.”² Lewis is certainly correct

1 *Maqalat*, p. 685 (2:87), in Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: OneWorld 2000), p. 155. All references are to *Maqalat-i Shams-i Tabrizi*, ed. Muhammad ‘Ali Movahhed (Tehran: Khwarizmi, 1369/1990), citing the volume and page number at the top of each page.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

in pointing to the central importance of the concept of “following the Prophet” (*mutaba‘at*) in the mystical thought of Shams-i Tabrizi; Omid Safi has discussed the likelihood that Shams even criticized Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi for insufficiently demonstrating this quality.³ Yet I must confess that it has always seemed to me that there was something more to say about this episode. Perhaps it is the occurrence of the word inebriation or drunkenness (*sukr*), which Shams uses twice to describe the reaction of Rumi to the example of Bayazid.⁴ The appearance of this kind of intoxication suggests that there is some excess or overplus of meaning that does not quite fit into the conventional notion of devotion to the example of the Prophet. Despite the fact that Shams criticizes Bayazid on a number of occasions, one retains a lingering suspicion that there was something about the boldness of Bayazid’s ecstatic claims, and the audacity of his statements, that called forth a response of equal audacity from Shams-i Tabrizi himself.

Lewis is quite aware that most Sufis would have been able to explain the sayings of Bayazid as ecstatic sayings or *shathiyyat*, which should not necessarily be taken at face value or condemned as blasphemous insults against God or the Prophet. He adds that other Sufi scholars were critical of the ecstatic expressions of Bayazid and Hallaj, which they explained away as the products of intoxication that could be safely disregarded. Yet, as previously mentioned, it is striking that Shams described Rumi’s reaction to this question as also being a kind of intoxication. Does that mean Rumi’s reaction was also invalid? Or was he responding to some deeper meaning in Bayazid’s expressions? These questions require further exploration.

It is well known that outrageous expressions like Bayazid’s “Glory be to Me” or Hallaj’s even more startling phrase, “I am the Truth (*ana al-haqq*),”

3 Omid Safi, “Did the Two Oceans Meet? Historical Connections and Disconnections between Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi,” *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* XXVI (1999), pp. 55-88.

4 As Movahhed notes, Rumi does not preserve Shams’ critique of Bayazid, as we see in *Masnavi*, book 4 (*Maqalat*, 1:500).

have often been classified as *shathiyyat* or ecstatic sayings.⁵ It is important to point out that these sayings are not necessarily to be dismissed as the ravings of lunatics, though there are undoubtedly some who hold that opinion. But to the contrary, there is abundant evidence to indicate that these ecstatic sayings have often been considered to be deep and genuine mystical insights, which unfortunately cannot be understood by the ordinary person. It is noteworthy that an authority of the stature of Junayd composed a commentary on the ecstatic expressions of Bayazid, which fortunately was preserved by the early Sufi scholar Abu Nasr al-Sarraj in his *Book of Glimmerings on Sufism* (*Kitab al-luma' fil-tasawwuf*). Notice the title that Sarraj gave to this section: "The Commentary on Ecstatic Expressions, and Words that are Externally Found Repulsive, Though they are Internally Correct and Well-founded." While it is true that Sarraj had to debate with the theologian Ibn Salim, who objected to Bayazid's sayings, Sarraj argued that his opponent had understood the words of Bayazid in an overly literal manner; but these ecstatic expressions require that one know the inner knowledge and experience that gave depth and substance to these otherwise strange expressions. Indeed, Sarraj refers to Junayd's commentary as a *tafsir*, a word normally reserved for commentaries on the Qur'an.⁶

Other interpreters, like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, basically accepted the validity of the insights expressed in ecstatic sayings, though al-Ghazali was seriously concerned about the possibility of misinterpretation by the less informed listener. Ghazali distinguishes two kinds of *shath*. The first kind consists of broad, extravagant claims (*made*) in passionate love of God Most High, in the union that is independent of outward actions, so that some go to the extent of claiming unification, rending of the veil, contemplative vision (*of God*), and oral conversation (*with God*). Then they say, "We were told such-and-such, and we said such-and-such." In this they

5 For a survey of the problem of *shathiyyat*, see Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984).

6 Movvahed (*Maqalat*, 1:499), in citing Ibn Salim's condemnation of Bayazid as an infidel (*kafir*), does not fully indicate Sarraj's defense of the sayings of Bayazid.

resemble al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, who was crucified for uttering words of this kind, and they quote his saying, "I am the Truth."

Al-Ghazali goes on to say that this kind of talk is very dangerous to the common people, because they lose their chance for salvation, since they think that a purified soul that has attained spiritual states can dispense with religious duties. The consequences of such an antinomian interpretation are so severe that al-Ghazali concludes that "the killing of him who utters something of this kind is better in the religion of God than the resurrection of ten others." The second kind of *shath* is that which is unintelligible to the listener, regardless of whether it is merely confused babbling or something which the speaker comprehends but cannot articulate properly. Since this is bound to be interpreted arbitrarily, it is not permissible to express such things publicly. In this exposition, Ghazali's main concern is to prevent ordinary people from being misled by difficult or strange sayings, even though he implicitly regards the genuine kind of *shathiyyat* as valid for those who can understand. In the most mystical sayings, however, he sees a real danger of antinomianism.⁷ Other Sufi writers, such as Ruzbihan al-Baqli, have given much more extensive positive interpretations of *shathiyyat*, as we can see from the latter's important commentary on ecstatic sayings, which is available in Arabic and Persian.⁸ And it is well to remember that Farid al-Din 'Attar, among others, has also given a spirited defense of the sayings of Bayazid.⁹

Now it is true that there are numerous passages in the discourses of Shams-i Tabrizi where he criticizes Bayazid's saying, "Glory be to me," for various reasons. As indicated in the first example given above, one reason was that Bayazid appeared to be claiming a station beyond that of the Prophet Muhammad, which would be a form of blasphemy; even if this is a form of intoxication, Shams remarks that it is incompatible with the truth fol-

7 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Cairo, n.d.), 1:60-62.

8 Carl W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mystical Experience and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), Appendix B, "Ruzbihan's Two Commentaries on the 'Ascension' of Abu Yazid al-Bistami."

9 Movahhed, 1:483.

lowing of the Prophet.¹⁰ But this is not the only reason that Shams gives for criticizing Bayazid. Shams on other occasions observed that Bayazid did not have the capacity to keep secrets. This is the well-known criticism of having a "shallow cup" (*tang-zarfi*), which certain Sufis had used to indicate the limited spiritual capacity of their predecessors or contemporary rivals. Thus Shams remarks as follows:

These saints and perfect ones, to whom the world pays respect, also have a veil. And that is that sometimes they relate their secrets with God, in order not to be destroyed. At other times they do not have this veil. I tell secrets, but I do not make a speech. It is a wonder of these saints, when speech appears. Bayazid does not belong to the tribe of these saints. They are the Prophets and messengers. Perhaps if they became intoxicated from the speech, they would be unable to drink. Not even 100,000 barrels of wine can do what the speech of the Lord of the worlds can do.¹¹

So "revealing the secret" is also a charge that could be laid against Bayazid, precisely because it was unlike the behavior of the Prophet.¹²

Shams does not stop here, however. On a number of occasions he goes out of his way to say negative things about the spiritual status of Bayazid. Shams even uses the story of Bayazid's prediction of the future appearance of the great Sufi Abu al-Hasan Kharaqani to point out his imperfections:

Finally, they do not hold Bayazid to be one of the perfect saints. One sincere dervish went to his tomb [i.e., Bayazid], placed his finger on his mouth [in astonishment], and said, "Ah! Between this dervish and God a veil has remained." This Bayazid passed by the village of Kharaqan, and he said: "After 150 years, a man will come out of this village who will be five degrees beyond me." And so it was, at that very time Abu al-Hasan Kharaqani became a disciple and put on a dervish cloak by his tomb.¹³

¹⁰ *Maqalat*, 2:92.

¹¹ *Maqalat*, 1:94.

¹² See also *Maqalat*, 2:130.

¹³ *Maqalat*, 1:117; also 2:228.

The point is not only that a sensitive visitor to Bayazid's tomb could still detect the presence of his spiritual veil, but also that Bayazid would be surpassed by Kharaqani. More substantially, Shams responds to a well-known story, according to which Bayazid refused to eat melons, because he has seen no evidence about how the Prophet ate melons; this was often taken to be a sign of Bayazid's deep devotion to the Prophet. Shams, however, poured scorn upon this story:

They say that Bayazid did not eat melons. He claimed, "I have never found out in what manner the Prophet, peace be upon him, ate melon." But following [of the Prophet] is both superficial and meaningful. You have observed the superficial aspect of following, but how is it that you failed to observe the truth and meaning of following?

As the Chosen One [Muhammad], God's blessings upon him, says: "Glory to Thee, we have not worshiped Thee as it befits Thee." As he [Bayazid] says, "Glory to me, how great is my station." If someone supposed his station to be greater than the station of the Chosen One, he is a real idiot and ignoramus.¹⁴

So it would seem that there is good reason to think that Shams was focused upon the problem of Bayazid failing to follow the Prophet adequately.

Nevertheless, there is a whole other class of remarks by Shams-i Tabrizi concerning Bayazid, which is harder to explain. Many of these statements have a bold and audacious character that clearly falls into the category of acts of boasting and one-upmanship, which are indeed important characteristics of ecstatic sayings or *shathiyyat*. These audacious and aggressive sayings are not without precedent in Near Eastern culture. We can find the rhetorical basis for this audacity in the ancient boasting-contest (*mufakhara*) of the pre-Islamic Arabs. In fact, the early Sufi author Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi (d. 563/1168) corroborates this connection in his widely used manual of conduct for Sufi novices, *Adab al-Muridin*. In the lengthy

¹⁴ *Maqalat*, 1:741, trans. Lewis, p. 158.

section on the dispensations (*rukhas*) or permissible deviations from the rules, Suhrawardi says the following:

Among the (*dispensations*) are boasting and publicizing one's claim (*to spiritual states*). In this matter, their standard is that one should intend to publicize the bounties of God, who is exalted above it. "Indeed speak of the bounty of your Lord" (*Qur. 93.11*). That is (*permissible*) in the raptures of a spiritual state or in a boasting-contest (*mufakhara*) with an adversary.¹⁵

This is precisely the same sort of phenomenon that we see in the *shathiyat* contests of the saints, when one outrageous statement is outdone by the next. Ruzbihan concludes, "This action is from the jealousy of gnosis, and jealousy is an attribute of God. . . . This wrangling (*munaqara*) of the prophets and saints is exemplary (*sunna*)."¹⁶

Shams-i Tabrizi was in fact familiar with this type of boasting contest, as he indicates in the following account:

Two mystics were having a boasting contest (*mufakhara*) and a debate with each other, about secrets of mystical knowledge and the stations of the mystics. One said, "A person who comes along sitting on a donkey, to me that one is God." The other one said, "To me, the donkey is God." In short, they tried to outdo each other by force. With Bayazid and others, in their words it is clear that it is not like this. But to spend time on their sayings is a veil, for this reason, that it is something else. Someone said, "What is that something else?" I said, "For example, you heard these words of mine, they became cold in your heart. That veil became something like this. They are near to incarnationism; the words of the spirituals are, 'we

15 'Abd al-Qahir ibn 'Abd Allah al-Suhrawardi, *Adab al-Muridin*, ed. Menahem Milson, typescript, Widener Library, Harvard University, p. 88, no. 193. Cf. Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi, *A Sufi Rule for Novices: Kitab Adab al-Muridin*, trans. Menahem Milson (Cambridge, 1975), p. 81, no. 205.

16 *Words of Ecstasy*, p. 38.

dwelled in a single body.' How will you comprehend that you are full of desire?"¹⁷

Although the example that Shams gives of dervishes in a boasting contest is a ridiculous one, it nevertheless provides him with an opportunity to imply that there are others, like Bayazid, who are different from the foolish pair depicted here. One may conclude from this that Shams considered the sayings of Bayazid to be serious and important consequences of a spiritual state, but at the same time, he was concerned about how words can be misinterpreted and become a veil. His concluding remarks in this passage quote an excerpt from a famous poem by Hallaj, arguing that it could be the source of an antinomian misinterpretation by those who consider themselves to be "spirituals."

But there is something else hidden in the criticism of Bayazid by Shams. The fact is that Bayazid held a singular position as the preeminent early Sufi known for *shathiyyat*. From an early date, Sufis who were contemporary with Bayazid engaged in boasting contests with him in the form of their own ecstatic expressions. Wasiti said, "They all died in delusion, up to Bayazid, and he also died in delusion." Likewise Shibli said, "If Abu Yazid were here, he could become Muslim with the aid of our children."¹⁸ At a later date, Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi also engaged in extensive interpretation of the sayings of Bayazid, including both praise of Bayazid and a subtle kind of one-upmanship to indicate his own superiority; Ibn 'Arabi considered the sayings of Bayazid as boasting (*fakhr*), but he maintained that his own statements were not boasting but commanded by God -- so he made the boast that he made no boast. Subsequently, Sufi thinkers such as Ahmad Sirhindi engaged in the same kind of "rhetoric of transcendental hyperbole" to claim a spiritual state that went beyond both Bayazid and Ibn 'Arabi.¹⁹ So from this point of view, dramatic criticism of Bayazid in the form of *shath* is perfectly compatible with the recognition of his spiri-

17 *Maqalat*, 1:103.

18 These and further examples are provided in *Words of Ecstasy*, pp. 36-40.

19 Carl W. Ernst, "The Man without Attributes: Ibn 'Arabi's Interpretation of Abu Yazid al-Bistami," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* XIII (1993), pp. 1-18.

tual eminence -- indeed, such spiritual critique in the form of a boasting contest could only be justified in relation to a spiritual master of very high degree.²⁰

Shams-i Tabrizi in some of his remarks actually insists that Bayazid must be recognized as a saint of the highest status. Thus, he maintains that even if the famous theologian Fakhr Razi were multiplied 100,000 times, he would not come close to the path of Bayazid.²¹ Shams repeatedly cites examples of Bayazid's spiritual attainments, including his ability to perceive the true condition of inhabitants of the graveyard; he also refers to Bayazid's selfless actions, such as exchanging the merit of 17 pilgrimages to Mecca in order to give water to a dog, and performing pilgrimage by circum-ambulating his shaykh seven times.²² Yet in other observations, Shams is willing to make theatrical denunciations, not only of the supposedly intoxicated Bayazid, but even of his sober counterpart, Junayd. Thus, Shams says, "They all speak about Junayd and Bayazid, let me say Junayd and Bayazid and their words are cold on the heart and appear cool."²³ And in the same breath, he can say, "That discussion that occurred yesterday -- what place do Bayazid and Junayd have here? And that Hallaj, who was also the shame of his master, has fallen -- and it has wiped him out! They are not even a hair on the body of [the Prophet]!"²⁴ Shams portrays Bayazid as giving a pretentious speech in a mosque, only to be silenced by a woman who denounces him for making a false spiritual claim.²⁵ In this way, Shams concludes, "Bayazid cannot endure my presence, for five days, one day, or none."²⁶

20 Further on the topic of spiritual boast, see Carl W. Ernst, "On Losing One's Head: Hallajian themes in works attributed to 'Attar," in *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

21 *Maqalat*, 1:128.

22 *Maqalat*, 1:194; 1:229; 1:264.

23 *Maqalat*, 1:275.

24 *Maqalat*, 2:86.

25 *Maqalat*, 2:104.

26 *Maqalat*, 2:125.

There is no question that Shams-i Tabrizi was deeply devoted to following the example of the Prophet in a profound manner, and that did lead to Shams to find fault with Bayazid Bistami for claiming a spiritual status that seemed to infringe upon the supremacy of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet the attitude of Shams towards Bayazid was complicated by the rhetoric of boasting that forms part of the tradition of *shathiyyat* or ecstatic expressions. In this respect, Shams also made boasts in the form of criticisms that included not only Bayazid but the scrupulous and sober Junayd. The audacity of Shams-i Tabrizi was born of the heat of his own spiritual experience, in comparison to which the words of previous mystics were simply cold texts. In short, the audacity of Bayazid Bistami was outmatched by the sayings that demonstrate the audacity of Shams-i Tabrizi.